

VZCZCXRO2938
RR RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHRB #0638/01 1021555
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 121555Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6305
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2904

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000638

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2017

TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: A MODERATE ISLAMIST MAYOR - THE PJD IN MEKNES

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Abu Bakr Belkora, the moderate Islamist mayor of Meknes, told poloff he was wrestling with poverty and governance issues during an April 10 visit to the city. Meknes is Morocco's sixth largest city and the largest local government controlled by the (moderate Islamist) Party of Justice and Development (PJD). In a subsequent lunch, the mayor and other local PJD notables candidly discussed sharp divisions within the party over whether it should join a governing coalition after the September elections. They assailed U.S. policy in the region, but emphasized that they relish contact with the USG. They strongly condemned terrorism in the region but linked it to anger over "unjust" U.S. policies. End summary.

¶2. (C) Abu Bakr Belkora has served as mayor of Meknes since ¶2003. Meknes, about 130 KM west of Rabat, is Morocco's sixth largest city and was the seat of the Kingdom in the 18th century. Meknes is the largest city controlled by the (moderate Islamist) Party of Justice and Development. Belkora expressed frustration that the political "balkanization" which hobbles governance at the national level is also reflected in the Meknes city government: 12 different parties are represented in the city council, six of which sit with the ruling coalition (led by the PJD) and six of which are in opposition.

Poverty is Enemy Number One

¶3. (C) Belkora identified poverty as the greatest challenge facing the city, observing that a seemingly endless influx of economic migrants from the impoverished surrounding countryside kept the city's infrastructure and services constantly strained to the breaking point. Belkora recalled that during a 2004 visit to the city by the King, Belkora asked him if he knew that Meknes was one of Morocco's poorest major cities. When the King replied affirmatively, Belkora told him that Meknes could be one of the wealthiest, if the government pursued a better rural development policy.

¶4. (C) Belkora lamented that Morocco continues to allow billions of cubic meters of fresh water to flow into the sea even as farmers get barely enough rain to yield an adequate harvest. Cost-effective damming and irrigation could transform the rural economy in the Meknes area and elsewhere in the country, which would ultimately address the problem of urban poverty in Morocco, he asserted. "I am working to get people to move from the city back to the countryside," he stated. Unfortunately, Belkora maintained, his ideas have so far fallen on deaf ears at concerned GOM ministries, where leaders are preoccupied with pursuing their own narrow interests, he charged.

15. (C) Consistent with other PJD interlocutors, Belkora told poloff that he expected the party to increase its presence in parliament from its current 42 seats (out of 325) to 60 or possibly 80 seats after this September's elections. Belkora conceded that there was a strong debate within the PJD over whether it should join with other parties to form a governing coalition after the elections, underscoring that he was firmly opposed. "We will be unable to achieve anything in the current context... We will lose credibility with the people."

16. (C) Belkora's deputy mayor (also PJD) and a PJD member of parliament for Meknes who joined Belkora and poloff for lunch, also shared the view that the PJD would be better served by remaining in the opposition. The government is on two tracks - one track answers to the Prime Minister, but the other track answers only to the Palace, and this is the track with the real authority, they maintained. Until the government can be restructured through legal and constitutional reform, the Prime Minister and his government will not have real power to effect change, and we should stay out of it, they contended.

Assailing (and Courting) the USG

17. (C) At a lunch following the discussion in the mayor's office, Belkora and PJD colleagues lashed out at the U.S. for its policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan. "These policies nourish terror and extremism in our region," they

RABAT 00000638 002 OF 002

claimed. They hastened to add that there was no justification for terror, but anger toward U.S. policy helped explain where the violence came from. PJD MP Abdullah Benanou expressed particular bile toward the U.S. approach to Palestine, alleging U.S. hypocrisy in preaching democracy and then punishing the Palestinian people for electing a government not to Washington's liking.

18. (C) Poloff countered that the U.S. had not questioned the legitimacy of Hamas' election but neither was it obligated to deal with a group that practiced terrorism and ruled out peace with Israel, refusing to be bound by earlier agreements. Benanou discounted the argument, pointing to Hamas' maintenance of a multi-year cease-fire as evidence that they were ready to make a deal, but Israel is not willing. On Iraq, the group focused on the "illegitimate origins" of the conflict but conceded that a precipitous U.S. withdrawal could worsen the situation. The group urged USG revision of policies, particularly its "unconditional support for Israeli aggression."

19. (C) Despite their sharp critique of U.S. policies in the region, Belkora and PJD colleagues professed admiration for U.S. society and U.S. achievements in many fields. They said they welcomed contact with the U.S. Embassy and placed a high value on continuous dialogue, which they hoped would lead to closer cooperation in the future. They were eager to know about "U.S. policy toward the PJD." Poloff responded that the U.S. neither supported nor opposed the PJD and was prepared to talk to any and all peaceful political movements in Morocco. The U.S. took note of the PJD's significant role in the nation's politics and respected the right of the Moroccan people to elect their representatives.

Days of Wine Numbered?

110. (C) Ironically, though Meknes is run by an elected Islamist local government, it is also the center of the

Moroccan wine industry and the city is reputed to have more bars per capita than any other town in the country. Asked about the seeming contradiction, Belkora responded that he does not believe in a confrontational approach to such issues. He said that Meknes wine tycoon Brahim Zniber is a personal friend and regular lunch partner.

¶11. (C) In March, the two even traveled together to Nimes, France to drum up investment in the Meknes region. Nonetheless, Belkora made clear he does not approve of the wine business. "I am trying to convince my friend Brahim that he should gradually replace his grapes with olives. There is no future for his product in this country." As for Meknes' drinking establishments, he said "some of my brothers are building mosques and some are building bars. It is much better to build mosques." (Comment: Though he registered disapproval of alcohol, Belkora did not come off as militant on the issue, and did not suggest that he was looking to take any specific action against this "vice." End comment.)

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

RILEY